



6. Watch Your Mouth! (James 3:1-10)

It was his first day on the job. He was a new clerk in the green goods department of a super market. A lady came up to him and said she wanted to buy half of a head of lettuce. He tried to dissuade her from that goal, but she persisted. Finally he said, "I'll have to go back and talk to the manager." He went to the rear of the store to talk to the manager, not noticing that the woman was walking right behind him. When he got into the back of the store, he said to the manager, "There's some stupid old bag out there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce. What should I tell her?" Seeing the horrified look on the face of the manager, he turned about and, seeing the woman, added, "And this nice lady wants to buy the other half of the head of lettuce. Will it be all right?" Relieved, the manager said, "That would be fine." Later in the day, he congratulated the boy on his quick thinking and asked, "Where are you from, son?" The boy said, "I'm from Toronto, the home of beautiful hockey players and ugly women." The manager replied, "My wife is from Toronto" — to which the boy said, "Oh, what team did she play for?"

So here we are back with James. Let me recap for those home from holidays. We have seen how James has written to churches to encourage them to persevere with their faith when the going gets tough and when temptation draws them away. They were trying to witness in a world hostile to believers. Unfortunately, they were also a people who were in danger of compromising their witness. How? By allowing sin in their life to cloud their witness and bring destruction in the church. What melodrama was he writing about?

No melodrama. Sin is not always melodramatic. Just as most crime never makes the news, so we barely notice it, so most sin we commit is not obvious, it's not high profile; it's not murder, it's not adultery, it isn't lying – except, James shows us that partiality, lack of care, self deception and lack of desire to live according to what we are called to are all sin and bring destruction into our lives unless it's dealt with.

So if any of that surprised you, we are now going on to a source of sin in our lives that we always underestimate, but it wreaks the greatest destruction and hurt in our lives and in the lives of people with whom we associate – the tongue.

The old saying goes: *"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me."* Rubbish! Lives can be just as easily destroyed by words as by sticks, stones or guns.

The 70s pop star Karen Carpenter died unexpectedly of heart failure at age 32 brought on by years of self-abuse from the eating disorder Anorexia Nervosa. It began to emerge later that her anorexia was brought on by a reviewer once calling her "Richard's chubby sister."

Sticks and stones and all that? Karen Carpenter's story is not unique. How many times have you been hurt by words? Sometimes they may have been words not meant hurtful. I know that before we had children, people so often offended us because we couldn't have children. "When are you going to start a family?". Think – they've been married 7 years, love children, no family – what do you conclude? Sensitive questions required! Or worse when they know you're childless - "Be pleased you can't have them, they're nothing but trouble". "You don't want to adopt, they're not your flesh and blood". It's the sort of thing people say in a well-meaning sort of way to childless couples, but these sort of words hurt. It's like a knife that cuts deep.

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So words destroy. This is why this powerful passage starts off with those who seek to teach. **3:1** *Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.*

Jewish communities held rabbis in huge respect, so many people fancied themselves as teachers because of the respect it brought. The danger is now as it was then, that people will seek to lead and minister because it will give them kudos. Unfortunately we are often worldly enough in churches to believe that if someone stands at the front, they are more spiritual than the rest.

James cuts straight through that and brings those who lead and teach down with a bump! There is a dire warning – you will be judged more strictly. Now that’s a down-side isn’t it? Why should God judge teachers more harshly? Because teachers have the ability to influence people’s lives. Teachers influence people and those who are taught may as a result suffer from the teacher’s limitations! When I was a teacher in a college, the thing I feared most was not quite teaching the syllabus quite right so that my students were not prepared for the exams. It was important because of they were not prepared properly, it would mess up their lives. So you want to preach and teach? Fine if God has called you to that, but remember, you have in you words an awesome responsibility. Teach in the flesh and you’re not teaching God’s. One well-known contemporary preacher, John Piper puts it this way:

All genuine preaching is rooted in a feeling of desperation. You wake up on Sunday morning and you can smell the smoke of hell on one side and feel the crisp breeze of heaven on the other. You go to your study and look down at your pitiful manuscript, and you kneel down and cry, ‘God, this is so weak! Who do I think I am? What audacity to think that in three hours my words will be the odour of death to death and the fragrance of life to life (2 Cor 2:16). My God, who is sufficient for these things?’¹

The only way this sermon will have any power is if God takes my human words and speaks into your heart – and my heart – by His Spirit.

So words are powerful, they can destroy but they can bring life and hope. All because you and I are able to open our mouths and communicate. James uses the common phrase “the tongue” to describe our speech. We recognize it easily – “hold your tongue”, “she is sharp-tongued”. In fact, even though sound is produced by our larynx, it is our tongues that shape the sound and make us understandable. It is by a conscious effort to move a small muscle in our mouth that we have the gift of speech. And our use of that muscle can bring hope or destruction. When we talk about the tongue we can’t blame the piece of muscle, but its our conscious use of it. So what does James have to say about the tongue and our use of it?

2. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. In verse 2 James widens the tableau to include all people. There is a sense in which the whole passage is a warning to teachers how easy it is to use words that dishonour God and lead people astray as a result. But it’s also a warning to all of the destructive nature of our words. Perfection is not something any one of us actually has – that belonged to only one person who ever lived – the Lord Jesus Christ. A perfect man never stumbles in what he says. Unfortunately, that means we are inevitably going to. In fact we probably all do it a few times a day MINIMUM. It’s not like partiality or thinking badly of someone – all sin. What we say that is not of God and destructive happens a few times a day. Maybe more. And worse, we probably don’t even notice. Some people can seem very spiritual and think themselves spiritual. Maybe they’ve listened with pride as they heard about this letter. They would never dream of showing partiality. They never feel ill of anyone. But not make bloopers in their dealings with people on a day to day basis. No way Jose! The tongue is the ultimate evidence of our fallen nature. And it’s an issue that most of us don’t think about too hard if we’re honest. We can see ill-thought words in other people, but so often we don’t reflect on our words other than to say “I don’t swear, I don’t shout. I don’t gossip” so therefore I don’t have a problem with my tongue. Oh yes you do says James. **If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man.** And invariably it’s something that we said that we thought was OK but if we reflected on what we had said, we would realize it was like a knife to whom we said it to. Careless talk costs lives! What does James say here that can help us get to grips with what we say? There are three things we need to understand to stop us slipping on banana skins!



It’s your most useful body part!

Determines direction 3-4
Inflames iniquity 5-6

¹ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 37-38

3 *When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.*
4 *Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.*

If there's any part of your body that will get you into big trouble, then it's your tongue! James gives us three pictures of how something small can have a big impact – a horse's bit, a ship's rudder and a small spark. Now let's be realistic, all these small things can benefit us greatly, but they can cause devastation if used wrongly. Your tongue is a God given tool. You can use it to build people up or bring people down. What you say can make a critical difference in someone's life – so use it. We often say how important it is to befriend and help people as Christians, but the most important way you can help them is by opening your mouth and telling them about Jesus – because that's the way you make an eternal difference.



The tongue poisons you as much as it poisons others – this passage is more about you and the damage it does to you than the damage you do to others.

5 *Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.* **6** *The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.* **7** *All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man,* **8** *but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.* **9** *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness.*

Look at what James says: **5** *Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.* Yes it's true that your tongue can make an impact bigger than it's size but beware hype! Hyperbole – exaggerating something for effect – boasting is a good example of that. Your tongue can destroy somebody easily by you being thoughtless. How often have we done that? Lots of times if we are brutally honest. A great fire can be started by the small spark of offence. And if it isn't dealt with, it will destroy. How many churches have been destroyed by just a few words out of place and people not being prepared to listen carefully to themselves and one another.

But there's an even worse aspect to all this. Your tongue poisons you. When you speak out of place you destroy your friendships and relationships. You need to realize that sometimes you just can't control your speech. Somehow things just kind of slip out, don't they:

A minister was making a wooden trellis to support a climbing vine. As he was pounding away, he noticed that a little boy was watching him. The youngster didn't say a word, so the preacher kept on working, thinking the lad would leave. But he didn't. Pleased at the thought that his work was being admired, the pastor finally said, "Well, son, trying to pick up some pointers on gardening?" "No," he replied. "I'm just waiting to hear what a preacher says when he hits his thumb with a hammer."

However, sometimes we speak words but do not understand their importance. Some things are easy to say, but difficult to undo. Take the marriage vows. They are easy to say but loaded with importance as people make promises to one. But they are words that are hard to undo if they are not meant and if made before God, were never intended to be undone.

And in our lives we use our words to praise God but out of our same mouth come words that dishonour Him. . . **9** *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness.* We all do it. You may not use the word curse but we found last week that just speaking ill of people or to them, is about the same. And what's that? Sin. And what does sin do? It brings death. Our tongue just brings the stench of death and hell into our lives. *It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.* If you want to poison your life and your Christian walk, be careless with your speech. It will destroy your reputation and may destroy that which is around you. Jesus said "The mouth is the open door to the soul . . ." **28** Jesus said in Matthew 15:18, "Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man." In the last War, there was a slogan Careless Talk Costs Lives. How true in our walk as the people of God. In our war against the forces of darkness, Careless Talk Costs Lives!



Speak who you are

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Why do we have this capacity to bless and curse with the same mouth? Surely if we have received Christ, we have turned to Christ. We have been changed, transformed, made anew. We accept God's word and we obey Him. We know all about taking care with our speech. James says, things that are different cannot come out of the same thing. Freshwater springs don't bring forth salt water. Vines don't bear figs. You are a child of God – the words of hell should not be coming out of your mouth! What comes out of the spring, shows what is inside the ground. What fruit a plant bears shows its species. Your words reflect the real you. If you are a child of God – speak like one. Sadly – or fortunately - in the end, what fruit we bear shows what we are. You are a child of God. Act like one, live like one, speak like one.

Peter, quoting Psalm 34:12-13, wrote, "He who would love life and see good days, Let him restrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit." A hateful heart will not produce helpful and healing words. No man can tame the tongue (v. 8), but God can.

Someone Wrote this:

*A careless word may kindle strife,
A cruel word may wreck a life;
A bitter word may smite and kill,
A brutal word will accomplish nil;
but
A gracious word may smooth the way,
A joyous word may brighten a day;
A timely word may lessen stress,
A loving word may heal and bless.*

What shall we then do?

As we come around the Lord's table this morning we need to realize that this small but significant part of our bodies has caused more damage to ourselves and others that almost anything else in our lives. We need to reflect on that.

We need to reflect on the gossip we have spread. We may think that we are not a church to gossip much. But we still gossip and offence is caused. We need to come in repentance of that and turn from our gossiping.

We need to reflect on how much are speech has dishonoured God and destroyed our relationship with Him and human relationships. We need to come before Him in repentance.

We need to ask the Holy Spirit to be the controller of our tongues

